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**Politicization, Leadership, and Communication:
Analyzing Terror Organizations Through a Grand Strategic Framework**

Kathryn Urban

The scholarly conversation around grand strategy tends to be limited to how nation-states formulate and employ this framework, with an outsized focus on superpowers. Grand strategic analysis has therefore become virtually interchangeable with great power competition, gauging how the U.S., China, and Russia seek to counter threats and influence global outcomes. Amidst the so-called “end of the nation-state”ⁱ and a rising role for non-state actors in international politics, it is vital that our understanding of grand strategy keeps pace with global reality.

Grand strategy can be a useful framework for understanding the long-term objectives of various non-state actors, including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and “super-empowered individuals.”ⁱⁱ These actors do not claim to function as sovereign governments, but they tend to operate in the same sphere as nation-states, interacting with global markets and multilateral institutions. Terror organizations represent a major non-state actor that operates via methods totally outside accepted norms. While scholars have assessed the strategic objectives of terror groups, few have framed this analysis in the context of grand strategy, aimed not only at understanding the tactical and strategic choices, but also the long-term political ends driving those decisions. Grand strategic formulation can be expanded beyond nation-states to actors that meet certain ideological and structural requirements. In the case of terrorism, groups with clearly defined political objectives and centralized leadership charged with long-term strategic thinking can reasonably be studied for the political principles guiding operations.

This assessment will begin with a review of grand strategic definitions and principles, gauging how they have been interpreted by different scholars and arguing for their relevance to terror organizations. It will then demonstrate the practical applicability of these ideas through case study analysis of two terror groups.

Defining Grand Strategy

A consistent challenge to effective grand strategic analysis is the lack of consensus within the discipline about how grand strategy should be defined. Debate continues about the breadth of interests that should be considered, as well as how implementation and prioritization of threats figure into this analysis.

The narrowest definitions of grand strategy are principally concerned with self-preservation. These classifications of grand strategy as “a nation-state’s theory about how it can produce security for itself”ⁱⁱⁱ or as “the theory, or logic, that guides leaders seeking security in a complex and insecure world”^{iv} imply a military-first approach to foreign engagement. These definitions account only for an actor defending its security, without considering how leaders may advance political interests beyond their borders. Rooted in a Cold War context of avoiding annihilation at the hands of a known, heavily armed enemy, this notion of grand strategy fails to remain relevant in a more globalized, multipolar world.

Although the parsimony of narrow, military-first definitions is appealing, an actor’s grand strategy cannot be reduced to a list of priorities without considering the resources and methods required for enactment. For these reasons, a more expansive definition of grand strategy as “the capacity of the nation’s leader to bring together all of the elements, both military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests”^v is more applicable to the modern environment. The assessment that grand strategy represents “a set of ideas for deploying a nation’s resources to achieve its interests over the long run”^{vi} goes even further in accounting for policy implementation.

Where both broad and narrow classifications of grand strategy fall short is in their translation to non-state actors. The assumptions inherent to definitions centered on the nation-

state – that a single leader holds exclusive control over both political and military functions; that myriad resources may be mobilized at a moment’s notice – generate complications in applying these same assessments to non-state actors. Instead, we return to the simplest, most-widely applicable definition of grand strategy as “ways, means, and ends,”^{vii} or, as was elegantly put by B.H. Liddell Hart, an approach that “looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace.”^{viii}

Grand Strategic Principles and Terror Organizations

There are two schools of thought on how actors pursue a grand strategy. In one, these actors frame their entire military strategy with postwar objectives in mind. In the other, the ultimate grand strategic calculus emerges from the political and military leaders involved in the creation and execution of strategy. The reality of grand strategic formulation falls somewhere in the middle, with leaders acting under a broad view of their long-term goals and individual personalities influencing calculations as the situation evolves.^{ix} In assessing an actor’s grand strategy, therefore, it is important to take into account both espoused political aims and the leadership structure influencing those goals.

The notion that terror organizations have a coherent military strategy is not a new one. Scholars have studied high-profile organizations like al-Qaeda^x and the Islamic State^{xi} with an eye towards this kind of strategic thinking, drawing on well-coordinated and highly publicized attacks to bolster their arguments. While military strategy is vital to winning a war, political goals not only represent “the original motive for the war,” but also drive “both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.”^{xii} The military side of terror operations is the most visible one, and perhaps, therefore, the easiest to accept. But despite a

tendency to dismiss mass casualty attacks as senseless acts of violence, terrorism definitionally has non-military objectives, aimed at “influenc[ing] the political behavior of a target group.”^{xiii}

Judging the grand strategy of a terror organization requires an assessment of these political objectives, focusing less on “process” goals, such as soothing rival tensions or attracting new recruits, than on “outcome” goals, long-term aims based in an organization’s ideological tenets.^{xiv} Although these objectives are shaped by the outcome of a conflict, that is not to say that grand strategy only comes into play once the war is won. An effective grand strategy permeates strategic and tactical decisions, shaping how leaders think about methods of conflict and legitimating certain targets with considerations for eventual peace.

To say that every militant operating under al-Qaeda plans attacks with a centralized strategy in mind is akin to saying that each of the millions of U.S. servicemembers has a clear understanding of the political ramifications of their actions. Examining the structure of an organization, especially how strategic priorities are set and transmitted, is vital to understanding grand strategy. This process is easy to trace in most nation-states: political goals are formulated at the highest levels of civilian governance, translated into actionable objectives by military brass, and conveyed through a chain of command. The inner workings of terror organizations are less transparent, but most groups do tend towards bureaucracy as they mature and grow,^{xv} with leadership dictating strategic priorities and commanders directing implementation.

Bureaucratic hierarchies are not necessarily at odds with the networked nature of most modern terror organizations. Mature groups tend to develop a hybrid structure, retaining hierarchy among leadership with operatives dispersed among geographically-dictated cells.^{xvi} This arrangement provides the agility and security afforded by decentralization while allowing leaders to retain much of their strategic and ideological authority: Cell leaders are afforded some

amount of operational independence, but are “only autonomous to the extent to which the leadership has explicitly granted them autonomy.”^{xvii} The case study analysis will include a more detailed assessment of several terror leadership structures.

Case Study Examinations

As was demonstrated above, three factors dictate whether a grand strategic framework can be applied to terror organizations: 1.) Defined political objectives; 2.) Centralized leadership responsible for long-term strategic thinking; and 3.) The ability to communicate priorities to the rank and file. These case studies will assess two well-known terror networks: al-Qaeda and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). After determining whether these groups meet these ideological and organizational requirements, the case studies will then explore the basic tenets of each organization’s grand strategy.

The case studies were selected to represent different types of terror organizations. These differentiating factors include: 1.) Religious versus nationalist ideologies; 2.) Transnational versus national scopes;¹ 3.) Transformational versus temporal objectives;^{xviii} and 4.) ‘Old’ versus ‘new’ terrorism (a distinction that has been made by some scholars).^{xix} It is not the goal of these cases to introduce new information on these terror groups. In fact, al-Qaeda and PIRA were selected as examples in part because of the extensive body of literature already surrounding their histories, operations, and ideologies. Rather, these case studies aim to reframe established understandings of these terror organizations under the ideation of grand strategy and to demonstrate the applicability to non-state actors.

¹ The operations PIRA did carry out outside of Ireland were aimed at British targets. Since PIRA’s objective was North Irish independence, attacks on targets of the British Empire should be considered national for the purposes of this analysis.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda's ideological tenets emerged out of Cold War-era nationalist movements, with events such as the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Iranian Revolution demonstrating the potential for local fighters to overthrow Western influence.^{xx} It was the experience of the mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan, however, that most directly gave rise to al-Qaeda, functioning as the first modern example of international jihad.^{xxi} In the wake of the Soviet-Afghan War, the former mujahideen were well positioned to continue a globalized fight. Not only had they successfully repelled a superpower, but their victory sealed the idea that God was on the side of the jihadis.^{xxii} As the mujahideen returned to their home countries in the final days of the Cold War, many encountered growing U.S. influence and emerging "harsh repression from secular Muslim governments."^{xxiii} Trained, mobilized, and part of a network committed to the defense of the Islamic nation,^{xxiv} the mujahideen were prepared to take up a new fight.

Osama bin Laden's 1988 founding of al-Qaeda realized the vision of repeating the Afghani success story worldwide.^{xxv} While the organization successfully carried out attacks on U.S. military and diplomatic sites in the early days of its operations, al-Qaeda is now inextricably linked to the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, the event which brought jihad into the global consciousness. Post-2001, al-Qaeda fully embraced a networked structure made up of unconnected cells. This decentralization, originally undertaken to avoid detection in the U.S. War on Terror,^{xxvi} also expanded the geographic scope of al-Qaeda. New communications technologies have furthered this growth, allowing the group to embrace militants beyond Muslim-majority nations.^{xxvii}

Al-Qaeda's overarching objectives are transformational in nature,^{xxviii} seeking to destroy current political systems and remake them in line with extreme Islamic philosophies. The two

targets of this transformation are the “near enemy,” rulers in Muslim-majority countries that fail to accept Islamist governance, and the “far enemy,” principally the United States.^{xxxix} Early al-Qaeda doctrine was concerned with both these targets.^{xxx} In the immediate wake of U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, however, al-Qaeda doctrine focused on American “Crusaders” as the ultimate enemy,^{xxxi} naming sources of U.S. political or economic power as well as American civilians^{xxxii} as top priorities for attack.

Amid the organization’s post-2001 reorganization, al-Qaeda is best thought of as a tripartite structure of the core, network, and periphery.^{xxxiii} The group’s leader, first bin Laden and later Ayman al-Zawahiri,² serves as the symbolic head of the Islamic nation.^{xxxiv} This leader, together with other top commanders, function as a “corporate board,” responsible for articulating broad strategies and priorities.^{xxxv} While this centralized core of leadership no longer takes part in the planning of specific operations,^{xxxvi} top commanders are tasked with managing relations with al-Qaeda affiliates to convey enumerated priorities and ensure compliance.^{xxxvii}

These affiliated organizations make up al-Qaeda’s network. While they do not have a say in the formulation of organizational priorities, they are officially part of the al-Qaeda umbrella. For localized jihad groups, joining this network comes with concrete benefits in the form of material support, an ideology for attracting recruits, and enhanced media attention.^{xxxviii} Despite the network’s dispersed nature, al-Qaeda prioritizes “absolute obedience and allegiance among the membership.”^{xxxix} These values, as well as a requirement that each affiliate swears a public oath of loyalty to the organization,^{xl} raises the costs to network actors going rogue.

Al-Qaeda has formal mechanisms in place to ensure that evolving ideological and strategic doctrine is effectively distributed throughout the network. It is the periphery, the final

² According to some reports, al-Zawahiri may have died in November 2020. Al-Qaeda has neither confirmed these reports nor named a successor to al-Zawahiri.

element of the organization's leadership, that represents the greatest risk for strategic breakdown. These lone actors tend to be inspired by al-Qaeda doctrine, but operate without formal ties to the group. As such, these peripheral fighters tend to be left in the dark around evolving strategic priorities, though they may access doctrinal materials on jihadi web fora.

Despite limited communication between the al-Qaeda core and periphery, the group does meet the requirements for operating on a grand strategy. The objective of promoting extreme Islamist governance constitutes a clear political goal, and the bulk of the organization remains responsive to the strategic priorities enumerated by leadership.

Much of the discourse around al-Qaeda's objectives centers on the idea of a pan-Islamic caliphate that functions as a sovereign state. This idea is likely a propaganda rallying point rather than a tangible goal. Given the group's resources, it is impossible for al-Qaeda to realize a physical caliphate in the short- to medium-term,^{xli} a strategic limitation that surely has been recognized and accounted for by the group's leaders. Furthermore, neither bin Laden nor al-Zawahiri ever articulated clear steps towards forming a caliphate, focusing more on "the process by which the present system will be destroyed than in the functioning of the new system."^{xlii} Far from undercutting the basic idea that al-Qaeda operates on grand strategic principles, the transparency of the caliphate aim suggests that al-Qaeda envisions mobilization as its ultimate objective, rallying a global network of Muslims to raise up political Islam at the expense of Western influence.

The idea that mobilization is a key strategic principle for al-Qaeda is not a new one, with scholars discussing how the group has leveraged its power by building a broad movement and putting forward a tailored brand.^{xliii} However, mobilization should be thought of not just as a

tactic or a strategy, but also as a grand strategy. Al-Qaeda's leaders are not realistically working towards building a physical caliphate. They are, however, engaged in the formulation of an 'ideological caliphate' to unite a global community of Muslims in their commitment to an extremist form of Islamic doctrine.

There are four key elements of this strategy of mobilization, which can be seen in al-Qaeda operations both before and after the September 11th attacks: 1.) Unifying the global jihad movement; 2.) Inspiring Muslims around the world to embrace jihad; 3.) Raising the cause of oppressed Muslims; and 4.) Diminishing Western power and global influence.

The first element of al-Qaeda's grand strategy is the creation of a "methodology"^{xliv} for jihad, uniting established militants, localized terror organizations, and radicalized individuals into a transnational ideological caliphate. During his time in Afghanistan, where groups of mujahideen each operated under different leaders and tactical ideas,^{xlv} bin Laden recognized that jihad would never achieve worldwide influence in this dispersed form. From its earliest days, al-Qaeda was conceived of as an umbrella for these various operations,^{xlvi} creating a unified "global community of radical Islam."^{xlvii}

Al-Qaeda's network is the component that makes this global movement possible. Because affiliated groups retain a large degree of autonomy, jihadis have every incentive to align themselves with al-Qaeda: So long as local objectives remain in step with the core's strategic priorities, there is no impediment to their operations, and they are free to pursue attacks with enhanced resources and global attention. U.S. policy has actually helped al-Qaeda grow its network. As American leaders struggled to understand and respond to terrorism near the turn of the 21st century, they tended to subsume all jihadist activities under the title of al-Qaeda,^{xlviii} thereby strengthening the organization's claim as the head of this community of global jihadis.

The second tenet of al-Qaeda's mobilization strategy is inspiring Muslims around the world to join the jihad movement. The September 11th attacks played a vital role in this mobilization. Although al-Qaeda attacks have since declined in severity, the 2001 World Trade Center operation will forever serve as a jihadi rallying point: Just as the mujahideen defeated the Soviet superpower, so too did al-Qaeda bring the American superpower to its knees. The rise of online jihadi communities has also been essential to al-Qaeda's ability to draw in new members, creating a low-risk environment for leaders to engage with members and supporters.^{xlix}

Given al-Qaeda's claim to represent the nation of Islam, a vital part of the group's media strategy is explaining the movement to the global Muslim community and "dispelling [so-called] misconceptions" of Islamic terrorism put forward by mainstream media.¹ This constituency engagement was a weak point of earlier jihadi groups which al-Qaeda has sought to correct,^{li} both through direct internet engagement and through 'jihadi journalism.' Throughout its history, al-Qaeda has sponsored media centers both in Muslim-majority countries and in Western Europe.^{lii} One function of these media centers has been gauging public opinion in the Arab World,^{liii} but they also act as a liaison between al-Qaeda and mainstream news outlets. These centers are the source of jihadi statements that subsequently appear on global networks.^{liv} They have also facilitated direct connections to terror leaders, such as the 1997 CNN interview with bin Laden, a "media glory" for al-Qaeda that broadcast the group's message to the world.^{lv} Television, the internet, and printed media have all become ways for al-Qaeda to engage with Muslims worldwide, courting them as potential fighters or supporters.

A third element of al-Qaeda's mobilization strategy centers in its explicit goal of assisting oppressed Muslims around the world, offering material and manpower support. One effect of this practice is enhancing the geographic spread of the group's global network. Al-Qaeda operatives

aided radical groups of Bosnian Muslims during the Bosnian War,^{lvi} set up centers of operations in Muslim-minority countries in the Horn of Africa,^{lvii} and have even been loosely connected to Chechnyan separatists.^{lviii} In perhaps the best-known expansion of jihad, the fighters that would go on to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL) were originally a band of fighters sent by al-Zawahiri to support the Syrian conflict.^{lix}

Beyond recruitment and network expansion, al-Qaeda's support of oppressed Muslims is part of a calculated appeal to the group's constituency. Al-Qaeda's mobilization grand strategy necessitates tacit acceptance, if not explicit support, from the global Muslim community if the ideological caliphate is to retain long-term influence. By presenting its operations as a means of freeing Muslims oppressed by secular or Judeo-Christian governments, al-Qaeda brands itself as a liberating group,^{lx} countering negative portrayals from mainstream media.

The fourth element of al-Qaeda's mobilization effort is actively working to combat American power, especially in Muslim-majority countries where the group sees Islamist governance as the natural form of power. This strategy suggests a zero-sum view of the world: The reduction of American power anywhere is a "historical victory"^{lxi} for al-Qaeda because it chips away at Western domination of global political and economic influence.

Al-Qaeda's primary objective in this space has been to lessen U.S. power through military operations. Some attacks have been timed for political impact, such as the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa linked to al-Qaeda's view of U.S. imperialism in Somalia, Yemen, and Kuwait.^{lxii} Others were calculated to cause the most damage to U.S. interests. During the 2008 recession, for example, al-Qaeda stepped up operations on U.S. economic targets,^{lxiii} notably oil infrastructure.^{lxiv} It was during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, that al-Qaeda leadership envisioned a "decisive opportunity" for gains against U.S. influence.^{lxv}

Recognizing the impossibility of defeating the U.S. militarily, al-Qaeda instead declared a war of attrition to break American will to remain in “bleeding wars” in the Middle East. The group’s core recalled network members from all over the world to build up al-Qaeda’s Iraqi operations in preparation for concerted attacks against the U.S. presence.^{lxvi}

From the early days of its Iraq operations, al-Qaeda strategists recognized that it was more effective to indirectly pressure the U.S. by way of its European allies. It had taken “spectacular attacks”^{lxvii} in the vein of the September 11th attacks or the USS Cole bombing to draw U.S. attention, but such operations were challenging to coordinate and execute, especially amid al-Qaeda’s decentralization efforts. European countries, however, were much more responsive to attacks against their citizens.^{lxviii} Al-Qaeda leadership embraced Europe as a strategic priority,^{lxix} operating on the assumption that if terror campaigns compelled European leaders to withdraw from Iraq, the U.S. would crumble under the costs of bearing the occupation alone.^{lxx} Attacks against the “weakest links” in the coalition, especially Spain, were calculated for maximum impact, including the 2004 Madrid train bombings, which are thought to have been a network or peripheral response to these strategic priorities articulated by al-Qaeda leaders.^{lxxi}

While al-Qaeda’s operations never successfully forced U.S. withdrawal from the region,³ the fight in the region did demonstrate an incredible capacity for mobilization. Fighters from all over the world – including many from U.S.-allied countries – flocked to Iraq to support al-Qaeda operations.^{lxxii} Furthermore, the group’s global messaging successfully incited attacks in Europe, including the Madrid bombings, which directly led to Spain’s withdrawal from the Iraq coalition.^{lxxiii} This indicates the power of al-Qaeda’s grand strategy of mobilization, galvanizing

³ The 2020-21 troop drawdown was driven primarily by domestic political considerations.

a global community in support of an ideology rooted in extremist Islamic thought and in opposition to American influence.

An interesting footnote to al-Qaeda operations in Iraq is the degree to which Cold War concepts were invoked to frame the fight against the far enemy. Jihadi thinkers made the case for developing chemical and biological weapons, calling potential al-Qaeda use of weapons of mass destruction an “equivalent deterrent” to U.S. cruise missiles, “as was the case with the nuclear balance between Russia and America.”^{lxxiv} Similarly, in targeting European nations, al-Qaeda leadership posited that coercing one or two countries to leave the coalition “will cause many others to follow suit, essentially creating a domino effect that will unravel U.S. Iraqi strategy.”^{lxxv} This use of Cold War rhetoric may have been a nod to the formative experiences al-Qaeda leaders had in Afghanistan, but it also suggests that the group saw itself as a global superpower, countering U.S. influence on behalf of the Islamic world.

By structuring the organization as an umbrella operation for global jihad, drawing Muslims to the cause, fighting for the liberation of Muslim communities, and pushing back on American influence, al-Qaeda has pursued a grand strategy of mobilizing jihadis and jihad supporters everywhere against the forces of Western domination. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have not anticipated achieving a physical, sovereign Islamic state, but do envision leading an ideological caliphate in which a global network of Muslims embrace extremist political Islam. This decidedly political aim extends beyond immediate military priorities and represents an objective situated in peacetime, separate from the tactical exercise of terrorism.

Provisional Irish Republican Army

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) emerged as a popular force for Irish independence in the early 20th century amidst the global wave of post-World War II nationalist movements.^{lxxvi} The group experienced multiple splits through its history, with each faction operating on slightly different methods and objectives. This case study will focus on the PIRA, or Provos, which split from the Official IRA in 1969 to focus operations on the defense of North Irish Catholics^{lxxvii} and effectively ceased terror activities after the 1998 signing of the Good Friday Accords.^{lxxviii}

PIRA is often cited as an example of successful terrorism because the group achieved greater autonomy for Northern Ireland after a thirty-year campaign of violence. Several factors influenced PIRA's ability to negotiate a settlement around their primary political objectives, including a stalemate of violence, strong leadership invested in the peace process, and the sponsorship of the U.S. as a third-party actor.^{lxxix} However, a grand strategy guiding the operations of PIRA and Sinn Fein, the group's political arm, also helped shape the outcome.

Early IRA leaders enshrined Marxist principles as a core aim of the organization, likely a response to global movements for economic liberalization.^{lxxx} This objective prompted PIRA's split, after a 1969 British loyalist attack on Clonard left dozens of Catholic civilians dead.^{lxxxii} Commanders who would go on to lead the breakaway group believed the IRA had devoted so much attention to advancing Marxist objectives that they neglected their fundamental duty to defend Catholic citizens. While economic goals periodically reemerged in PIRA doctrine, the fledgling group concentrated on its role as a Catholic defense force.^{lxxxii}

Despite the religious tones that suffused PIRA's origins, the group's political objectives had little to do with sectarianism. PIRA first and foremost prioritized ending the British occupation of North Ireland and establishing a free and independent state. These aims were a

response to the 1921 British Boundary Commission that excluded Protestant-majority northern counties from the independent Irish Republic, leaving Catholic nationalists in a North Irish state that remained subservient to the British Empire.^{lxxxiii} PIRA took up the fight for independence, believing it had been charged with the “unique and historic mission” of expelling the British.^{lxxxiv}

PIRA doctrine dealt exclusively with these nationalist aims, not with sectarian strife. The group’s founding documents declared “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible,” and dictated “that the British Government has no right in Ireland, never had any right in Ireland, and never can have any right in Ireland.”^{lxxxv} Although PIRA’s rank and file would continue to be motivated by the conflict’s religious element,^{lxxxvi} the objectives and strategies pursued by the group’s leadership were decidedly political in direction.

Authority for PIRA decisions rested in the Army Council, a seven-member body responsible for policy making and negotiations.^{lxxxvii} Other leadership elements rounded out PIRA’s structure, with offices dedicated to engineering, intelligence, political education, publicity, and other functions, as well as a system of command for the active service units engaged in PIRA’s militant activities.^{lxxxviii} This bureaucracy almost resembled that of a parliamentary state, in a nod to PIRA’s self-imposed mission of serving as Ireland’s rightful government.^{lxxxix} With strategic responsibilities centered in the Army Council and military brigade leaders charged with overseeing and communicating with fighting cells,^{xc} PIRA met the structural requirements for a grand strategy almost since its inception. In the lead up to the peace talks, however, PIRA’s centralized leadership went a step further to be concentrated almost exclusively in one person.

Gerry Adams’ career as a PIRA strategist began in the 1970s, when he resolved a tension that had plagued PIRA since its inception: How could the organization keep the support of the North

Irish public it had gained in functioning as a Catholic defense force without diverting resources away from expelling the British? Adams put forth strategy painting sectarian conflict as a British master plan to generate internal conflict,^{xcii} thereby marrying the rallying point of sectarian conflict within the group's nationalist strategy. By the 1980s, Adams took over PIRA leadership and began talks with British representatives to work towards a negotiated settlement. This "secret diplomacy" would go on for fifteen years without the knowledge of the Army Council.^{xciii} Adams acted as the sole voice of PIRA authority in these talks, accompanied only by his chosen advisors and the "think tank" he set up to advise him personally on political and military strategy.^{xciii} It was not until a deal negotiated with the British was on the table that Adams approached the Army Council and Sinn Fein to get their buy-in.^{xciv} The results of Adams' secret diplomacy would go on to form the basis of the entire North Irish peace process.

Throughout its lifetime, PIRA held to clear political goals, operated under a centralized leadership – both de jure with the Army Council and de facto through Adams – and had systems in place to coordinate and monitor operations throughout the network. As such, the organization can reasonably be said to have functioned under the auspices of a grand strategy.

PIRA's primary objective was securing a unified, independent Ireland. This goal dictated the tactical and strategic decisions made throughout the Troubles. However, looking beyond realizing that political goal, PIRA sought to present itself as a legitimate military and political representative of the Irish people. The Army Council already had some claim to this responsibility, having been named Ireland's sovereign representative with the dissolution of the Second Dail.^{xcv} In order to secure this right, PIRA pursued a grand strategy of legitimation, responding to constituent demands and balancing terrorism with political engagement.

In order to function as a sovereign government, PIRA had to be responsive to demands of Irish citizens.^{xcvi} Especially once Sinn Fein began competing in North Irish elections, PIRA leaders relied on their constituency not just as a pool of recruits and source of material support, but also for votes to keep Sinn Fein in power. Media operations played an important role in gauging public opinion, and PIRA dedicated an entire arm of operations to organizing press conferences^{xcvii} and circulating newspapers.^{xcviii} It was not enough, however, to understand the desires of their constituency. PIRA also had to adapt operations to keep this electorate satisfied.

A major tactic PIRA used to appease its supporters was limiting the scope of violence. In the early days of PIRA terrorism, this meant prioritizing British targets over militant Irish Protestants. PIRA doctrine called for attacks against occupying troops “in the belief that the British public would not long tolerate such casualties” and the government would be forced to withdraw.^{xcix} As operations expanded to bombing campaigns in Britain and Europe, targets were selected for disruption of British capabilities, such as the planned 1988 car bomb attack on Britain’s Gibraltar military base,^c or for political symbolism, such as the 1990 assassination of Airey Neave.^{ci} This is not to say that sectarian violence did not occur. Indeed, PIRA conflict with predominantly-Protestant loyalist gangs in the mid-1970s fueled some of the most violent years of the Troubles.^{cii} From a strategic standpoint, however, PIRA aimed to minimize Irish casualties with an eye towards eventual independence and Irish unity.^{ciii}

As PIRA and Britain neared a peace deal, the Irish public became less tolerant of any non-combatant deaths, even of British citizens. Sinn Fein became concerned that “with every uninvolved civilian killed, public anger grew and electoral support shrank,”^{civ} leading to a PIRA pivot to economic targeting. The group’s 1990s bombing campaign principally hit business districts and transportation centers in London.^{cv} These operations kept pressure on the British,

damaging London's reputation as a business center^{cvi} and leading to a measurable fall off in tourist revenue.^{cvi} By planning bombings outside of business hours, however, PIRA was largely able to avoid civilian casualties,^{cvi} assuaging Sinn Fein's concerns. In the lead up the 1997 elections, PIRA went even farther in moderating violence, with leadership declaring a "tactical period of quiet" to avoid any repercussions that could damage Sinn Fein's electoral chances.^{cix}

The second key aspect of PIRA's grand strategy of legitimation was balancing between military and political tactics. The tradeoffs between these two approaches fluctuated over the course of the organization's lifespan, but the willingness to engage on both tracks throughout indicates that violence was never an end in and of itself, but rather a means towards North Irish independence. By employing these two tactics, often in tandem, PIRA legitimized its leadership as the rightful head of the Irish state and commander-in-chief of the Irish military.

Almost from PIRA's inception, political tools were used to resolve issues, although terrorism remained the predominate tactic.^{cx} Two separate ceasefires with the British in the 1970s would hold for a year or less before breaking down, but these early efforts at peace indicated PIRA's willingness to negotiate. More importantly, they got the Irish public invested in a peaceful resolution to the Troubles.^{cx} Constituent pressure would drive PIRA negotiation efforts up through the 1990s peace process.

In part due to a military stalemate^{cxii} and in part out of fear of a third failed ceasefire,^{cxiii} PIRA pivoted to a total embrace of political engagement under Adams. The dual track of militarism and electoral politics was an important element of the group's grand strategy of legitimation, creating the framework for PIRA to transition from a terror organization to a recognized sovereign government. Adams' "long war" doctrine reconciled the group's political and military objectives, which earlier leaders had regarded as contradictory. Rather than looking

for a quick military victory over the British, PIRA leaders and volunteers embraced the idea of a protracted struggle that would likely end in a settlement.^{cxiv} The long war doctrine allowed Adams to begin PIRA's transition towards legitimate political action without sacrificing the militancy that had initially brought the group to power.

PIRA terrorism did not end with the opening of the 1990s peace process (in fact, bombing campaigns actually increased in brutality during this time^{cxv}), but the group's militancy underwent an important transformation with the shift in targets and tactical period of quiet described above. PIRA and Sinn Fein leadership became committed first and foremost to political strategies, and violence was made to be subordinate. If terror campaigns were damaging to Sinn Fein's electoral chances, they were halted; if proposed tactics could scare the British away from the negotiating table, they were denied.^{cxvi} It could be argued that at this point in the Troubles, PIRA became more of an insurgency than a terror organization, "driven by grievances against a nation-state"^{cxvii} with sectarian conflict officially renounced.^{cxviii}

PIRA never gave up the militant aspect of its operations, refusing to decommission until the Good Friday Accords were fully implemented and holding the threat of renewed violence as leverage for full commitments to peace.^{cxix} Nevertheless, its gradual transition towards electoral politics plus consistent efforts to appease the Irish public fed into PIRA's grand strategy of legitimization, fighting the British with the intention of emerging as a sovereign government. In some respects, it succeeded. While Ireland remains divided and PIRA does not govern exclusively, Sinn Fein does hold seats in the Northern Irish Assembly,^{cxx} and by some accounts, the Army Council continues to influence the party's political strategy.^{cxxi}

Conclusions

Non-state actors with political objectives, leadership responsible for strategic thinking, and clear paths of communication between the core and periphery can reasonably be said to operate under grand strategic frameworks. Case studies of al-Qaeda and PIRA, both organizations that meet these baseline requirements, confirmed the applicability of grand strategy to terror groups and highlighted the important political goals underlying military ones. While most modern terror organizations operate along a quasi-hierarchical structure, there remain exceptions. To apply these analytical principles to truly leaderless groups or those without political ambitions extending into peacetime risks conflating grand strategy with strategy or tactics, undercutting the practical value of such study.

Analyzing the grand strategy of terror organizations is more than an academic exercise. It represents an important means of understanding and combatting such actors. Thinking beyond the immediate military objectives to political and ideological goals enables counter-terror professionals to “balk the enemy’s plans”^{cxix} rather than target individual actors or operations. Only through this calculated study of ways, means, and ends can counter-terrorism strategy move beyond the “fantasy”^{cxix} of zero risk to strategically target the most salient point of terrorism: long-term plans for political gain.

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